

Christ Church Elbow Park Archives

Interview with Joan (Joni) Mallabone

Christ Church Elbow Park Oral History Project 2020

Interviewer: Catherine Evamy

5 December 2020

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Zoom Interview

Transcript of Joan (Joni) Mallabone

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Interviewed by Catherine Evamy

Catherine Evamy, Interviewer

Joan (Joni) Mallabone, Narrator

Catherine Evamy: My name is Catherine Evamy, and the date is the fifth of December, Saturday, 2020. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, I am distance interviewing with Christ Church parishioner, Joni Mallabone. This interview is being recorded for the Christ Church archives and will be made available to researchers. Joni, you will be given a transcript of the recording and will have the opportunity to review it and reconsider any portions of the interview at that time. Is that okay with you?

Joni Mallabone: Yes.

Catherine: Good. Thank you again for setting aside the time to participate in this interview. Would tell us something about yourself, your name, where you were born and went to school, and your early life?

Joni: My name is Joni Mallabone, and I was born in Calgary, Alberta at the Holy Cross Hospital. I'm the third of four children. I lived in Elboya when I was younger. My mom and dad were married at Christ Church. My mom, Mary Lenore King, lived in Elbow Park growing up. The King family were members of Christ Church.

Then she married my father, Hugh Robinson, who lived in the Roxboro area. They were members of Christ Church for a while. After they moved to Elboya, they were a founding family of St. Philip's Church. We were all members of that church for a long time, and I was baptized there. Then at the age of 16, I was very interested in music. I was studying voice at the time, and it was recommended that I joined the Christ Church choir. I joined the Christ Church choir when I was 16, under the direction of John Searchfield, and that started a very long relationship with Christ Church, and I've never left since then, other than when we moved to Edmonton for a while.

Catherine: What did you say your maiden name was?

Joni: Robinson.

Catherine: Your parents then helped to establish St. Philip's?

Joni: They were one of the first families to get that church started. I began singing in the choir at St. Philip's Church when I was six years old. When I decided to join the choir at Christ Church, it was hard for my family because my parents were so connected to St. Philip's.

Since then, my older sister, Sheila Wares has also joined Christ Church, and she has worked at the church as treasurer, as you know. My older brother, Ian, is a parishioner as well. It's interesting, we've shifted back to Christ Church, being that St. Philip's no longer exists. When the parishes of St. Philip's and St. Mark's merged, it was a challenging time for people, I think.

Catherine: That whole business of amalgamating parishes and closing old churches was a very difficult issue in the diocese and very difficult for the parishioners. You've had a whole lifetime singing in the choir, and you started at Christ Church under the direction of John Searchfield?

Joni: Yes.

Catherine: I understand that girls were invited into the choir relatively recently because the boys' choir had existed for a long time.

Joni: When I came to Christ Church at 16, I actually was a part of the adult choir. I wasn't in the children's choir at that time, but it's rather interesting because I was with the choir for about two years before John asked me to lead the girls' choir. You're absolutely right. The boys' choir was always in the spotlight. It was just in the time when girls' choir was starting to become accepted, really. At that time, Margie was leading the boys' choir, and I was leading the girls' choir. I led the girls' choir for 10 years. That was a really wonderful experience because, of course, again, I was very young and it provided me with a lot of excellent teaching experience.

Over the years we have had a number of different people who did lead the two choirs. Carmen Stansberry led the boys' and girls' choir for a while before me, and Ron Fawcett and Kathy Chapman led the girls' choirs after me.

Catherine: Did you take the girls' choir overseas to Britain or to the States to sing?

Joni: No. At that time, there were between 16 and 18 girls in the choir. We did tours around Alberta; I call them more of a trip. We sang in Cochrane, we sang in Millarville, and we sang in Banff. There was really no funding for this so parents would chip in to help cover the cost.

The Cathedral of the Redeemer choir did go over to Britain. As far as I know, the boys' choir never did go from Christ Church. I know Margie assisted with the cathedral choir (boys and male choir) as organist and accompanist. We had some wonderful experiences. Eva Templeton was the choir mother, and she did a fabulous job. Her two girls were in the choir. She would make sure the girls were properly dressed and make sure that they were all set to sing, often with a roll of

lifesavers in her pocket to assist if the girls were restless during the sermon. There are some amazing stories about that. We did take them on them on the train to Banff and that was a wonderful experience.

Catherine: Did you?

Joni: Yes. We stayed overnight in the church basement. It was just really wonderful for the kids to do that sort of thing. Then we did a couple of bus trips where Trudy Wilson and Barbara Fairman, who's now Barbara Curley, were chaperones, and their kids were in the choir. We had a lot of fun. It was a great time.

Catherine: You must have some really funny stories to do with those experiences too, have you?

Joni: I do. Actually, I have a whole binder, which I did give to John Mendham, of pictures and memorabilia. A lot of those girls that were in the choir are now in their 40s and 50s. We had so many fun experiences. I look back on it now, and I think, "Man, how on earth did I do that?" because there were 16 of them. It wasn't like there were four or five.

Catherine: Were all the junior members, the kids, from Christ Church parish or were some from the community?

Joni: Some were from the community. Eva Templeton was absolutely instrumental in getting families to bring their kids to the choir. One very special story was with Art and Betty Anne Smith and their daughter, Shelley Anne. At that point, they were members, but some of her friends came as well, which was neat. Eva Templeton couldn't be at church to assist one morning, and so Art Smith arrived, and he was great. What a good sport. He didn't really know what to do, but his daughter Shelley Anne helped and got everybody organized. I just remember some of those stories with very fond memories.

Catherine: They had to get dressed in the choir robes?

Joni: Yes, then, of course, with the collar, making sure it was the right way. Some of the girls were very small, like seven years old I suppose. Oftentimes, we had people from the neighbourhood, as well.

Catherine: Christ Church was reaching out to the neighbourhood in that respect? I'd love to read some of these stories.

Joni: There were some good stories and some of the pictures are really funny just because you look at those people now, and they're very much older and into their careers and family life.

Catherine: Besides the choir, did you have any time left over to participate in other parish activities at that time of your life?

Joni: That was when I was really young. After I stopped leading the girls' choir, I continued on with the adult choir for two more years. After Guy and I were married in 1984, I stayed in the adult choir for a few more years. Then I was busy with my young family.

There was about a 13-year absence. Then I came back to the choir just after I had breast cancer in 2004. We moved to Edmonton in 1996, and Guy was working for the University of Alberta. We came back in 1999. Then Margie was in touch with me and wanted the children, my girls, in the choir. They joined the choir, and I was choir mother then.

Catherine: You have two daughters?

Joni: I have two daughters, Kate and Heather. They were in the children's choir first, and then Margie and the adult choir were going on a tour. She asked me if I would come back to the choir, to go on that tour. I was absolutely scared stiff to go because my kids were young. It took a lot of convincing, but I did join the choir to go on that tour, and that was when we went to Scotland, England, and Ireland. I only joined them for Ireland and England. That was when I came back to the choir, so there was a big gap in the middle.

From 1987 to 1995, I was involved with Christ Church in attending only. Then when we moved to Edmonton, we were actually members of Christ Church in Edmonton, which was a fabulous parish, and of course, my kids were very young. They had an amazing rector there, John Privet, and my girls sang in the choir in there.

When we moved back to Calgary, we again became members of Christ Church. We never really quit, as I would be in Calgary a lot because my parents were here. We definitely attended Christmas and Easter services and that kind of thing when we were in Calgary, so that was good. I wasn't very involved at that time because, of course, I was a busy mom.

Catherine: You were raising two daughters of your own and had this very intense activity with choirs in different parishes. You had contacts with other kids from the neighbourhood. Did the kids from outside the immediate parish feel any connection to the parish?

Joni: I think so because there were people in our church that were just amazing. We used to have a church administrator, and his name was Ted Harbert. It was after Jim Coop. Ted Harbert absolutely adored the girls in the choir, as did Swanny (Archdeacon Cecil Swanson), who was an Honorary Assistant Priest at Christ Church. Swanny and Ted Harbert would come and bring the kids gifts, little Christmas cards, and they would bring them little cookies. They really made it feel like a family. At that point, also, Margie was the sub-organist (her title at the time); she was a huge support to me and to the choir. We had a lot of meals together. We would have rehearsal and then we would often have a supper after. We always had the Lenten programs on Wednesday nights, and so we always would participate in that. There was often a children's program after the dinner, the potluck supper. There was a lot of connection. They weren't just coming to choir and going home. On the Sunday mornings, again, with Eva Templeton being the choir mother, it was a really cool experience. I don't know how many of the families then were connected to Christ

Church, but I know the girls certainly felt connected and many of them stayed in the choir for a long time. Many of them took pride in the years of service they gave to the choir and the church.

Catherine: It's really interesting to hear about the effects that the choir had in a much wider way in the community by influencing the kids as they were growing up. Actually, that leads to a question about when you were a school teacher. Given the situation in our lives today with the lies, the conspiracy theories, the misinformation, the social media, the algorithms, everything that affects and influences young people today, perhaps this is causing a lot of angst — how do kids learn to think critically? My question to you as a teacher would be, how did your faith values help guide the young people through this kind of mess of information?

Joni: In terms of that, what I feel is that when I was leading the girls' choirs, there were not all of these influences that kids have now. As a teacher, I'm really upset about this and the number of kids that are affected these days, and it is very scary to know that a lot of them are not doing well. Mental health-wise, it's really alarming. I'm thankful that I didn't have to deal with a lot of that when I was leading the choir.

My thought is, life was so much easier when I was young, teaching these young people. There was really nothing happening in comparison to what young people have to face today. At that time, writing a note to somebody in class was a devastating thing. Parents got much more involved. The whole issue of bullying has exploded because it's not just somebody saying that your hair is funny or your clothes aren't right. This whole thing with social media is very scary. Certainly, in my teaching career as a resource teacher, I dealt with this kind of thing daily. One text message sent at one o'clock in the morning can cause such incredible pain to students and then that explodes to others in their social realm, as well as to the school.

I know a lot of the general population don't understand why bullying is not being stopped. What many people don't realize is that it is so huge when you even investigate one of these situations. Because if somebody sends a nasty text to somebody at three in the morning and copies four of their friends, then it can involve maybe six to eight hours of investigation before you get to the bottom of it. Sometimes you're having to get the police involved, depending on what's being said or sent. It's absolutely massive. What my fear is, is that if the family don't have a faith or are not providing young people with guidance, you see why some people get to the end of their rope and don't see that there's a way to solve it.

Catherine: I wonder how the church or the different denominations can help or even become more aware of the extent of these issues, as it pertains to young people.

Joni: My husband was watching TV the other night; there was a program about young men and suicide. These young men were taken to this camp and given a course on how to become more resilient. Resiliency is a huge issue, but a lot of people right now believe that their children can do no wrong and don't provide them with the proper guidance of, "Okay, you will make mistakes, and how am I going to help you understand that that mistake had an effect on other people," as opposed to "my child would never do that." Oftentimes the schools are brought in to

try to solve the issue, which is often unfair as the texting and social media situations often occur out of school time.

I know that in my own school and in my group of friends, very few people go to church and very few people claim to have faith. A lot of people have turned their back on their faith.

Catherine: Where do people get their facts from, which are unbiased and not news as entertainment value? As you say, not a great number of young people or their families come to any kind of church or mosque or religious organization, which teaches a basic value system. How is that going to affect their education, their jobs, their whole future?

You were mentioning Guy, your husband, and we know that he's been involved at Christ Church also, particularly the fundraising and financial aspect. Can you speak on his behalf about what he's been doing?

Joni: Sure. Guy's passion and profession is in raising money for different organizations, and he has definitely helped with raising money for the grand piano, which is in the church now, which was a very successful campaign. He also volunteered as a member of the Endowment Fund Committee. When I was working on the Stewardship Committee, he was certainly a big help in guiding me, Margie French and Richard Horbachewski with our work on developing our campaign brochures and in preparing us for our meetings with parishioners.

Catherine: What about your daughters, are they in Calgary?

Joni: Kate is married and lives in Calgary with her husband and baby daughter. Kate was in the children's choir for many years. When we returned from Edmonton, she was in the children's choir under Margie's leadership. She then joined the adult choir and has been a long-standing choir member. Then she recently had her daughter, so she has taken some time off from the choir. I'm not sure when or if she will return, but she has really gained many wonderful things from the youth choir, as well as the adult choir. She did come with us on one of the choir tours to England when we sang at Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral.

It was a really a wonderful experience to be able to share with my daughter. Kate has a beautiful voice and has done a lot of solo work in the choir. She is a teacher and has already had an eight-year career. Currently, she's on maternity leave, and she will return to teaching in the fall.

My daughter, Heather, is articling as a lawyer in Vancouver. Heather was a member of the children's choir from a very early age. I think she started when she was six; she could just barely read. She was in the choir for about eight years. She loves to sing. Margie used to do all the wonderful musicals with the kids, and both girls were involved in those. They used to do a musical every May. When I was leading the girls' choir, we did one musical where Herb O'Driscoll was the main character.

That was so much fun. Margie has done many of those, and they would be presented right in the service. Kate and Heather probably participated in six or seven of those with Margie and loved them.

Catherine: Has anything else come to your mind that you would like to have recorded and talk about?

Joni: To answer the question "What particular participation gave you the most satisfaction?" I would say that leading the children's choir was an excellent opportunity for me, and the adult choir has continued to be very fulfilling. I was also a member of the Board of Management for four years with Ansley. I worked with different people with Stewardship running our annual campaigns. I also worked with Prayer Partners a long time ago, and that was really neat matching older people in the parish with young people. Some of those relationships lasted for a very long time.

I know, in particular, I would never have had a connection with Alice Ronning, for example. Alice was Kate's prayer partner, and they kept in touch for I'm sure eight years or longer. Susan McCowan was Heather's prayer partner, and just even seeing how some of those relationships were formed, that was a great program. Not just with my kids, but there were a number of partnerships. Just getting to know another family in that way, where you're getting to know their kids' interests and that sort of thing. That was really neat.

Certainly, I've done a lot of work with the Outreach Network. I'm very passionate obviously about that, and with the refugee work. That has really fulfilled me.

Catherine: I'd like you to talk a little bit more about the outreach work that you did with the refugees, let's say, the Syrian family or other families.

Joni: I've always been very interested in Outreach — I volunteered for a long time with Children's Hospital as well — and the whole notion of helping people when they're really having difficulty with a child who's ill or people coming to our country who do not know where to turn for certain things. When we as a church decided we were going to sponsor a family, now that's going back probably eight years, I very much wanted to be part of that. Jennifer Eaton and I found it very difficult to jump through the government's hoops, because we kept running into the issue where there weren't families that we could connect with because, at that time, many organizations were trying to connect.

We came in through the back door with our two families, and it has been so fulfilling and so wonderful to get to know these people. I've been involved very deeply with the Korsha and Abou Akel families for probably five years now. Helping people to understand that there are ways to make things happen, but oftentimes, it is still a matter of who you know and what you have learned about working through government organizations. It's really hard for immigrants to get a job to this day and they often are not able to use their professional skills when they move to Canada, which is shame.

Some people get very frustrated and think, "Well surely, they can go get a job at McDonald's," but when people are coming from different countries with all this knowledge, it is demeaning to think that they can only have an entry-level job at something when, in fact, they can be contributing so much. For me, working with a Muslim family has been a very rich experience for me. I've learned so much from them and so appreciate how similar we are, coming from different backgrounds and countries. I was so fortunate to be able to participate in their Citizenship Ceremony and found it very meaningful.

Watching the Abou Akel family cope through deep stress and seeing how they were treated very poorly by slum landlords in Calgary, while living one neighbourhood away from me has certainly been an eye-opening experience for me. Seeing how hard it is for people to get a roof over their head is very upsetting. There are many ways that we can help. Also, with our Indigenous family, the Cardinal family right now, and some of the other families we've helped through Collective Kitchen, coping with poverty and how horrible it is for people with young children and that kind of thing. That work has been very fulfilling.

Catherine: Can you say a little bit more about the Cardinal family, the Indigenous family that you speak of?

Joni: Yes. Lorraine Melchior has been in touch with them. Again, I don't know how she got in contact with that family, but the young mom has four children. One of the young children had cancer and is thankfully now in remission. This young mom was having to navigate the healthcare system, while also caring for her other three children. Her older daughter is having some teenage issues where she's run away, and she's dropped out of school and that kind of thing.

Lorraine Melchior brought this family to us. We've been supporting them monetarily every month for a number of years and just helping at Christmas and that kind of thing. Lorraine has been the main contact, and now Solange Dunn is also connecting with them. They're not members of our church, but they are a family with a connection to us.

Solange Dunn is a member of our parish. She was employed at the Drop-In Center, and she recently has not been working there, but she has two children, one of whom sings in the children's choir.

Catherine: Is it possible for you, maybe with your daughter's help, to draw up a CV of yourself and a history of what you've done? These are the threads, which give the colour and the texture to the whole storytelling of the parish.

Joni: There was the question about how did my church work connect with the life of the local community. Again, I feel that there's a connection between just volunteering in terms of the people that I've met. The people that I have met through volunteering at Children's Hospital and the church and the Stampede connect in different ways. For example, I actually know Kate Thrasher from the Stampede, but now we're both at Christ Church.

The Outreach part, I feel has been there for a really long time. I'm not sure I got my passion for outreach from the church, but I certainly got that from Children's Hospital, and so that's woven in the work that I did at school until I retired. Again, just being aware of families that are in need. When you're in a school environment, you have so many hats that you need to wear, but again, some families are really suffering. Just thinking, "Okay, what could we as a school do to help?"

Also, the community connections that come from that and through Children's Hospital, you were always connected immediately because that's got a very big spotlight in the community. Then in the school realm, it was very helpful that I knew about charities like the Magic of Christmas or Christmas hampers through these different organizations. Children's Hospital gets a lot of support where maybe there's a family in your community that doesn't, and the same with the church. This initiative we're doing with Outreach right now, we're connecting with four different agencies to support.

It's amazing to me what a parish like ours can do easily to support. Even at our last meeting on Monday, it was fascinating because through Amazon now, you can connect a wishlist, and people in their homes in COVID times can press the button and send four or five items to the church to be distributed to the different organizations. I just think it's really neat how it all connects.

Catherine: I agree entirely with what you say that as one becomes more involved in outside community organizations, whatever they are, your mind gets opened to, not only the needs in the community but the numbers of very worthy organizations, which are addressing those needs.

It's important to understand here too that a lot of parishioners are heavily involved in philanthropy of their selection and what appeals to their hearts. They are giving, not under the umbrella of the church, but directly to service organizations.

Joni: That's something that we must highlight. I know, at one point, people were concerned that we were only designating a certain amount of money to Outreach. Some people were very upset that we weren't, as a church, giving very much money out of our operating budget to Outreach. There are people in our parish that are giving a great deal of money to many charities and organizations, so what's being filtered through the church is a minor portion. We're so fortunate. Not all parishes have that, but we do.

Catherine: It's not only money; it is leadership and participation in the other organizations, whether it's at the board level or it's the hands-on level.

Joni: When you look at why I got involved, both of my parents were very involved in parish life. I watched that from the day I was born, I'm sure, because my father was an accountant, so he was very involved as treasurer, and in different roles within St. Philip's Church. My mom was on the Altar Guild for 50 years, and my mom was always that very caring individual who would take food to people and visit people when they were ill or lonely. She was always reaching out, always in contact with her friends. I have often thought about that. I wonder if my children will carry this on.

Catherine: You're modelling it for your children, your immediate family, your students, for the congregation.

Joni: It's been interesting watching through the years the different rectors and priests that have been with us. We have had an amazing journey if you look back. Each one has made an impact. It's fascinating for me as an older adult, now, to reflect back, because as each person leaves, they leave a mark and you look at the strengths of those people. We were just talking at the Outreach Meeting, about Herb O'Driscoll. As a leader of the girls' choir and as music director, he used to keep us on our toes. He is such a creative person and had so much to offer us.

When I think about Herb and the impact that he made, I also think of David Tatchell, Alan Challacombe, Bob Griffiths, Richard La Seuer, all the way through to William Pike, Ansley Tucker, we've had some amazing people in our building. It's all part of the story. We've got a real longevity here.

Catherine: We are doing a lot of archival work and you're really bringing information together which can be utilized in many directions.

I should repeat how grateful we are for your time and you never know, somebody else may come knocking on your door for another interview with a different set of questions. Would you be open to that?

Joni: Sure, yes.